

Canonizing a Black Voice : Race, Language and Culture in the poetry of Langston Hughes

Joyjit Ghosh

The boundaries of English literary canon always remain indefinite. In the first place, there is often a debate among critics and scholars which is a literary work and which is non-literary. Edmund Burke's political speeches like *On American Taxation* (1774) and *Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775) have long back entered the literary canon. So is true of James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) which is a classic biography in English literature. The so called sub-literary forms including letters, diaries, memories are now considered as part and parcel of literary canon. Thanks to the contribution of literary theories like New Historicism / Cultural Materialism etc.

Secondly, inside the boundaries of English literary canon some authors are major and others are peripheral. Thus, when we speak about English Romantic poets we discuss Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron - the last one who in some European countries still ranks second to none among English poets. But we scarcely refer to John Clare who even the other day was regarded as a 'peasant poet'. But Clare is in the process of being re-discovered as research on English Romantic literature opens new vistas day by day.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, English literary canon does not any more refer to British literature alone. For American literature hugely contributes to it along with other literatures in English like African, Caribbean, Canadian, Australian etc.

which are described as 'New Literatures' now-a-days. But even when we discuss American literature we see that till 1960s its history is largely confined to the writings of white Americans. Thus in Frederick J. Hoffman's classic study *The 20's* (1949), the cult figures of the Harlem Renaissance - Brown, Hurston, Cullen, Hughes, Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Jessie Fauset - are not even mentioned in the tweed of names that appears on the cover. In the latest edition of *The American Tradition in Literature* (1986) no Black writers appear in the "Fiction in Search of Reality" section, and Langston Hughes and Richard Wright are represented only in the narrow context of "The Literary Expression of Social Thought : The Thirties and Forties." Robert Stepto, the literary historian of the entry on 'Afro-American Literature' in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, draws our attention to all these gaps and silences in the history of American literature and comments that all these editors "want to maintain the traditional American literary canon", thereby hinting at the politics of representation (Stepto, 1988, 788-90).

Our present concern is Langston Hughes, and in this paper I would like to explore how the different socio-cultural issues (including language, race, gender) voiced in his poetry contribute to a distinctive Black identity and give him a lasting place in the American poetic tradition.

The foremost issue in Hughes's poetry is the issue of race. "Without going outside his race", Hughes wrote, "there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work". Indeed there is an unending supply of themes at hand when a Black writer "chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones", Hughes emphasized (Hughes, 1926; 2012, 2). The opening lines of "Do You Reckon" may come to one's mind in this context :

Mr. White Man, White Man,
How can it be,
You sleep with my sister,
Yet you won't shake hands with me ? (444)

Here the issue of race is counterpointed against that of gender. The poet gives a sharp dig at the dominating classes with their hypocritical culture and manners.

This is, however, not the best of Hughes. The moderate defenders of 'canon' describe a work 'canonical' when it appeals to widely shared human concerns and values. At once "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" would come to our mind :

I have known rivers

I have known rivers ancient as the world and older than the

flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (23)

The rivers the poet speaks of include Euphrates that cradled Babylonian civilization, Nile that nourished Egyptian civilization, Mississippi that often haunted the imagination of Whitman, and Congo that always means a lot to the Africans. Kathryn Van Spanckeren justly observes that here the poet "embraces his African - and universal - heritage in a grand epic catalogue". The critic continues, "The poem suggests that like the great rivers of the world, African culture will endure and deepen" (VanSpanckeren, 1994, 69).

Langston Hughes always did believe, "No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself." A Negro poet should, therefore, shun the desire "to pour the racial individuality into the mold of American standardization" (Hughes, 1926; 2012,1). "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" may be written in standard English but Hughes in his poetry often uses a language which attests the identity of a Black writer and at the same time communicates to other fellow artists to express their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (Hughes, 1926; 2012, 3). In the first chapter of *Decolonizing the Mind* Ngũgĩ gives an insightful discourse on the aspect of language as culture :

Language as communication and as culture are ... products of each other. Communication creates culture : culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world (Ngũgĩ, 1986, 15-16).

The discourse quoted above contains certain vital points : 1) Language is not only communication but culture as well. 2) Culture carries values and thus helps in perception. 3) Language as culture mediates between one's own self and other selves. Ngũgĩ believed that language is "inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the

world" (Ngugi, 1986, 16). Hughes seemed to believe in the same philosophy. In this context his "Note on Commercial Theatre" may be referred to :

You've taken my blues and gone
 You sing 'em on Broadway
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
 And you ribbed 'em up with symphonies
 And you fixed 'em
 So they don't sound like me.
 Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.
 You also took my spirituals and gone.
 You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
 And all kinds of Swing Mikados
 And in everything but what's about me- (215-16)

This is the language of cultural revolt - revolt against those who rob and distort the Black rhythm and music and make an inauthentic representation of them ("they don't sound like me"). The Black is unhappy for the White culture does not recognise his/her distinctive identity / history / character. One may note that the poet here uses colloquial idiom and eschews grammatical order ("Yep, you done taken my blues and gone") as a mark of protest against what he himself calls 'American standardization'.

In his preface (1855) to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman emphasizes, "The English language befriends the grand American expression... it is brawny enough and limber and full enough" (Whitman, 'Preface', 729) Hughes is in search of no 'grand American expression'. His aim is to evolve an idiom which is human enough to voice the resilience of the black masses who suffered over the centuries but never succumbed to racial domination :

Children, I come back today
 To tell you a story of the long dark way
 That I had to climb, that I had to know
 In order that the race might live and grow.

Apart from language other weapons of protest in Hughes's poetry include the rhythms of jazz and his incongruous humour. Thus jazz to Hughes is "the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world" (Hughes, 1926; 2012, 3). One may remember his "Warning" at this point :

Negroes,
 Sweet and docile,
 Meek, humble and kind :
 Beware the day
 They change their mind !
 Wind
 In the cotton fields,
 Gentle breeze :
 Beware the hour
 It uproots trees ! (365)

The rhythm echoes a militant protest against all the white exploitative / repressive forces (the allusion to 'cotton fields' is indeed telling). But Jazz is something more. To the poet it is an 'inherent' expression of "Negro life in America" - a tune that laughs and cries at the same time. Hughes's "Me and the Mule" is a suitable example here :

My old mule,
 He's got a grin on his face.
 He's been a mule so long
 He's forgot about his race.
 I'm that old mule -
 Black - and don't give a damn !
 You got to take me
 Like I am. (239)

Here is a poignant expression of "Negro life in America" (Hughes, 1926; 2012, 3). The humour is incongruous. Laughter is ironic but finally a sensitive soul is moved to tears.

The poetry of Hughes is, therefore, (as he himself proclaims) often "racial in theme and treatment" (Hughes, 1926; 2012, 3). But Hughes emerges as a classic when he transcends agony caused by racial hatred and gives dream a touching lyrical expression:

It's a dream you keep dreaming again.

It's a tear you turn into a smile.

It's a sunrise you know is coming after a while. ("The Heart of Harlem" 312)

This is how Hughes illumines the meaning of 'Harlem'. The dream he speaks about here is the 'dream deferred' of the African-American man. The lines have a pulse, a beauty, hope and familiar kindness. The readers who find his poetry too radical politically would not perhaps fail to appreciate these lines and draw inspiration for life from them.

Hughes never forgets his Afro-American identity but he does not believe in antagonism to the dominant white community. He only wants a human recognition. He seeks love and compassion from the whites :

I do not hate you,

For your faces are beautiful too.

...

Yet why do you torture me,

O, white strong ones,

Why do you torture me ? ["The White Ones" 37]

If the whites do not recognize him or continue to torture and oppress him he will defy them :

American am I, none can I :

He who oppresses me, him I defy ! ["Dark Youth of the USA", 156]

Hughes may not be as much aggressive as Claude Mckay who wants to fight the white supremacy till the point of death :

Like men we'll face the murderous,

cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back ! ["If We Must Die"]

(Mckay, 63)

but his life like that of Mckay is a Black poet's struggle for identity. Hughes's assertion, "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother" ("I, Too", 46) contains an obvious allusion to the poetry of Whitman, the Bard of America. Hughes's implication is that he may not be white like Whitman but in his own way he can also contribute to the culture of America.

Whitman in the 'Preface' to *Leaves of Grass* wrote, "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races" (Whitman, 'Preface', 713). Whitman is a poet of democracy. His poetry utters the word 'En-Masse'. Hughes on the contrary bewails the lack of democracy in his country. Yet he passionately believes that America will be America again :

Someday somebody'll

Stand up and talk about me,

And write about me —

Black and beautiful —

And sing about me ["Note on Commercial Theatre", 216]

Hughes thus dreams to get a space in the American literary tradition : the 'me' refers not only to the self of the poet, it rather represents all the Negro artists who vindicate their identity and consciousness without fear or shame.

The dream of Langston Hughes has largely been fulfilled. His poems like those of his fellow poets like Mckay and Cullen are frequently discussed by literary critics and historians. Hughes, however, enjoys a more privileged position in this regard for his poems are often included in the representative anthologies of poetry across the world and in the syllabi of college / university courses. But his poetry is not yet wholly free from the politics of representation. Thus in the ninth volume of *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature ('American Literature')* edited by Boris Ford, Langston Hughes figures only in the 'Bibliography' section. Mohan Ramanan in *Four Centuries of American Poetry* (an anthology which the college / university students often cite) includes the poems of Hughes but his 'Preface' to the anthology hints at the politics of inclusion :

The twenty-five poets represented in this anthology obviously do not exhaust the American tradition but do reflect my attempt at presenting a balanced picture of it. The major poets in the American tradition find a place here. I have taken care, however, to include several women poets and a few Black poets. This I realize, is only a token acknowledgement of their contribution in expanding, if not altering the canon. Their inclusion raises crucial questions about what constitutes the American poetic tradition and gives this anthology a more representative character (Ramanan, 1996, iii).

Ramanan, therefore, in his own way makes an attempt to open the American literary canon so as to make it 'multicultural' instead of 'Eurocentric' and patriarchal. But from his words quoted above the implication is clear that in the Indian curriculum Langston Hughes is yet to be considered as a 'major' American poet. The anthology edited by Ramanan was brought out back in 1996. Curriculum in our country is changing fast and drastically. With the inclusion of Dalit / marginal literatures in the syllabi of colleges / universities in India the Black poetry of America is being highlighted these days. Dalit writers and critics frequently allude to the poems of Hughes and quote from his celebrated essay 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain'. Let us hope, one fine morning, and that is not far off, readers of poetry all over the world will recognize Langston Hughes as a major figure in 20th Century American Literature.

Note :

The quotations from the poems of Langston Hughes are from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad & David Roessel (New York : Vintage Classics, 1995). The page no(s) are given in parentheses.

Works Cited :

- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) 23 August 2012 < [http : // www.english.i/inois.edu/maps/poets/g-I/hughes/mountain.htm](http://www.english.i/inois.edu/maps/poets/g-I/hughes/mountain.htm) >
- Mckay, Claude. "If We Must Die", *The Black Poets*, ed. Dudley Randal. New York : Bantam Books. Print
- Ramanan, Mohan. 'Preface', *Four Centuries of American Poetry : An Anthology*. Macmillan, 1996. Print
- Stepto, Robert. 'Afro-American Literature', *Columbia Literary History of the United*

States, ed. Emory Elliott, Martha Banta et al. New York : Columbia UP, 1988.
Print

Thiong'o, Ng?g? Wa. Decolonizing the Mind : The Politics of Language in African
Literature, 1986. Delhi : Worldview Publications, 2007. Print

VanSpanckeren, Kathrya. Outline of American Literature. United States Department
of State, 1994. Print

Whitman, Walt. 'Preface 1855 - Leaves of Grass, First Edition', Leaves of Grass, ed.
Sculley Bradley & Harold W. Blodgett. New York : Norton, 1973. Print